The Interspecies Newsletter

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One on One

Constance Perenyi's descriptions of various self-funded travels to clean oil-soaked birds sometimes sounds as if she were traveling some eco-circuit in Hell. She has contributed both writing and illustrations to this newsletter over the past few years, and I believe her first-person writing about humans inside nature to be among the finest anywhere, although still remarkably underpublished. This piece is two years old and, obviously, still pertinent. Her new children's book, **Growing Wild : Inviting Wildlife Into Your Yard,** has just *been published by* Beyond Words. —JN

What I remember most is the smell. Even now, one whiff of Dawn dishwashing detergent and I am no longer standing at the kitchen sink but in a large gymnasium filled with frightened animals. I have volunteered to care for birds after three major oil spills off the coast of Washington. And while I am a veteran of sorts, I still have no idea who discovered the multipurpose utility of Dawn. I do know it is the best solvent to remove oil from feathers and fur. Pumped by the gallon, this pungent blue liquid is vital to the rescue efforts. It can also trigger memories.

My recollections of the most recent Washington spill had just begun to fade when the Exxon Valdez went aground in Alaska. At first I tried to ignore details of the disaster presented by the media, but I was haunted by a familiar scene. I could imagine the rows of oil-soaked birds held in paper bags and boxes, could almost hear the steam rising from soapy washtubs. From my own experience, I knew what volunteers in Alaska were doing for the injured animals, but I could not fathom the scope of their efforts.

On a larger scale, Prince William Sound on Good Friday looked much like stretches of the Washington coast after four Christmas week spills during the last five years. Different circumstances, different amounts of oil, but the same picture of once pristine environments now stained beyond recognition.

These were certainly not the images that first led me to work with birds. I began as an artist, trained in visual composition and steeped in a love of nature. For years, my work was abstract, the birds and other animals implied but obscure. Dissatisfied, I perceived what was missing and began to fill in the gaps with practical experience by working for Seattle's Woodland Park Zoo. I learned about birds by preparing their food and cleaning their enclosures. I read everything I could about birds, absorbing facts and experiences and eventually translating them visually.

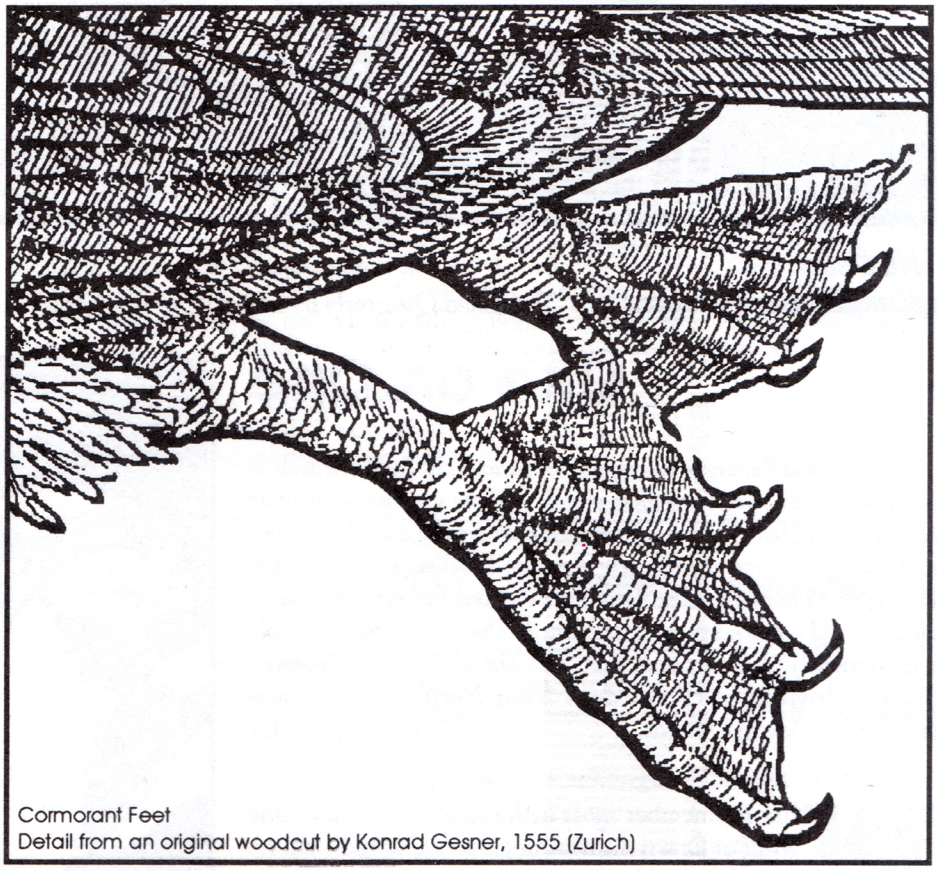
But it wasn't until I worked at an emergency oil spill clinic that I stopped observing animals at a distance. Surrounded by injured birds, I could not separate myself from their vulnerability. I was sickened by the oil on their feathers, evidence of human insensitivity to the environment. At the same time I was heartened by the humane concern of my fellow volunteers. Once state agencies or local wildlife rehabilitation experts set up a clinic, it was primarily the volunteers who kept it afloat by donating supplies and energy. Most volunteers hear about the accident on news broadcasts and decide to help for a few hours, days, or weeks. Many arrive without animal handling skills, but all come with a commitment to learn and do whatever is necessary.

Looking back at three clinics, I recall different lessons from each. My first, in a gymnasium 309 miles north of Seattle, seemed like an adventure, a chance to practice what I had learned as a keeper's aide in the waterfowl unit in the zoo. Because I had pertinent training, or thought I did, the coordinator asked me to force feed a group of buffleheads and goldeneyes. They were small birds, I had small hands, so it seemed logical.

Logical maybe, but immediately I realized how unprepared I was to pick up a wild creature. I reminded myself that no one, not even a veterinarians or professional trainers, instinctively knows how to handle animals. These skills are learned. After several hesitant attempts, I grabbed a bufflehead, pried open its beak, and pushed a dab of moistened food down its throat with my little finger. I worked to perfect my technique, trying to move quickly without further stressing the bewildered birds. To this day, I smile at the memory of my contact with dozens of tiny duck tongues.

In contrast to the pleasant memories of that first spill, my recollections of the most recent one are colored by desperation. Two days before Christmas 1988, a tugboat rammed a tanker near Gray's Harbor, southwest of Seattle. Oil soon spread south to Oregon and north to British Columbia. Officials initially underestimated the gravity of the worst accident in Washington history and were reluctant to enlist aid. First asking for help from experienced volunteers only, the Washington Department of Ecology later acknowledged its gratitude to less experienced people who traveled from as far away as California and Canada.

By the time the first wave of volunteers arrived, three critical days had passed. Inadequate supplies of hot water at a temporary clinic hampered washing efforts. Some of the rarer birds, such as a rhinoceros auklet and a few loons, were washed immediately after recovery from the beach; but hundreds of common murres, pigeon guillemots, western grebes, and various scoters sat in oil for nearly a week. As the birds anxiously preened, they swallowed the toxic oil coating their feathers. Each day without a bath lessened their already slim chances of survival.



Cormorant Feet
Detail from an original woodcut by Konrad Gesner, 1555 (Zurich)

I joined other volunteers in an attempt to keep the unwashed birds fed and hydrated until we could move to better facilities. Exhausted after my first day at the clinic, I checked into the motel, tried to rest, and awoke abruptly. I looked around the unfamiliar room and thought I saw shadows of murres and guillemots on the floor. They broke in dark waves against the bed, vanishing every time I reached out. I forced myself to go back to sleep, and then dreamed a about a small white-winged scoter I had held during the day. Unlike the other birds, she was quiet. I stared at the soiled feathers on her back and sheltered her head with my hand. As I rocked her, her heartbeat weakened, and I repeated, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry." For weeks afterward, I fought to rid myself of this nightmare and often awoke in tears.

Time has passed. The dreams have faded, but not the scars on my hands. These commemorate the feisty energy of the murres and my often unsuccessful attempts to catch them without getting caught first. Jousting with one after another, I learned to respect their tenacity. Even weak birds could be formidable. During my final days at Gray's Harbor, I overheard a coordinator instructing new recruits in the art of handling western grebes. He believed the longer-necked, sharply beaked species to be the most dangerous and difficult to control. "Just be grateful we don't have any cormorants," he concluded. "They're the worst."

Before dawn on Christmas 1985, I took a ferry from Seattle to the Olympic Peninsula and signed the volunteer roster at a gymnasium in Port Angeles, where a spill had just occurred. All morning I prepared birds to be washed. Before the first rinse, each bird received preliminary veterinary care: antibiotic injections, protective salve for its eyes, and a careful beak swabbing to remove residual oil from its mouth. Then the tedious scrubbing process began, with volunteers carrying birds back and forth from sudsy washtubs to the showers until every feather rinsed clean.

Volunteers at emergency spill clinics are generally divided into two groups: feeders who work with cleaned birds, and washers who are confined to the locker rooms. The people with the oiliest clothes work with the dirtiest birds and pass them on to cleaner volunteers as the washing progresses. At Port Angeles, I started with dirty birds; by noon sticky oil had chewed holes through my rubberized overalls. Here was proof of the corrosive properties of petrochemicals. While I could not see its longterm effect inside the birds at the clinic, I knew the oil on their feathers was deadly. Unwashed, these creatures were helpless, they could not fly, could not float, could not stay warm.

I, at least, could take off my useless overalls. Once I had peeled to a cleaner layer, the washroom coordinator handed me a double-crested cormorant that had been washed and generally de-oiled. My task was specific: to clean each feather on its head with a water-pik. For hours I sat on a folding chair with the bird balanced between my legs and the Pik humming on a table next to us. With one hand, I supported the cormorant's neck. With the other hand, I focused the water and combed across the feathers in short, methodical strokes.

I began the process cautiously, watching the bird while it noted my every move. Earlier, a veterinary technician had closed its sharp beak so the bird could not bite or spear its handlers. But when my charge began to blow bubbles through its elongated nostrils, I removed the band. The cormorant instantly relaxed, and seemed more curious than dangerous.

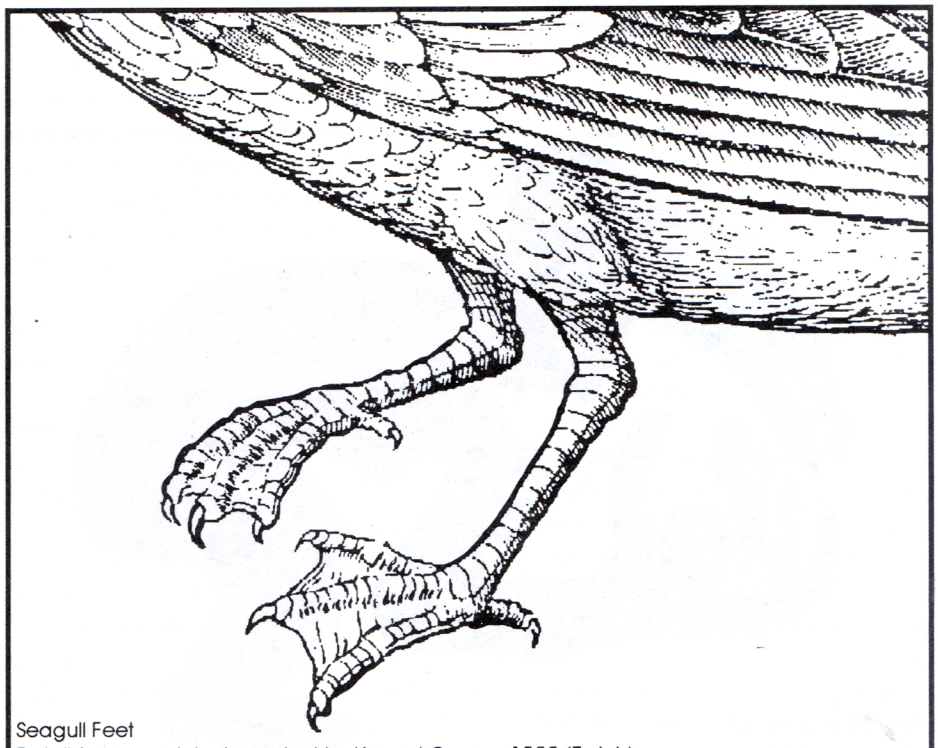
At once I realized that this was an extraordinary opportunity. I had handled captive birds at the zoo, and wild ones at other clinics, but I had never examined one so closely. I had relied on mounted specimens and photographs for details. I had filled my head with facts and could, for example, recite the range of avian body temperature. But until that day, the figures had remained abstract. As I sensed the cormorant's damp body heat radiating through my clothes, I experienced warm-bloodedness in a new way. The bird and I exchanged body heat everywhere we touched. I could feel impressions of webbed feet on my legs and feather marks all along the inside of my arms.

Unlike others around us, this bird appeared healthy and unafraid. As it looked around the room, the cormorant seemed to watch the day unfold as a spectacle rather than a trauma. It was calm and seemed willing to cooperate, which enable me to consider every feather tract I cleaned. The more I contemplated the depth of its blackness, the more detail I perceived. Points of turquoise outlined pale green eyes. Burnt orange skin marked the bird's throat in colorful, featherless contrast. Against my skin, its snaky neck and armored feet felt reptilian. I could even feel its small flexible gular pouch.

As the afternoon unfolded, the bird became my sole focus. Earlier in the day, I had yielded to every distraction – watching other people, even checking the clock. But as I worked with the cormorant, I became oblivious to the hectic activity around us. I shut out the noise so I could concentrate on my task, and soon it seemed as if the bird and I were the only beings in the room. Outside, a few miles down the beach, state ecologists surveyed the oil slick and assessed its impact on a large population of overwintering birds. None of us could reverse the damage, but I knew that by working on the problem at its most elemental level, I had found a way to make amends with a single bird.

I first understood my natural affinity for animals as a child, and at an early age I promised to work on their behalf. But my role as a defender was much clearer before I reached adulthood, before I was invested in a web of technology. At one time, I could not imagine doing anything to harm another creature. Now as I try to minimize my own negative impact on the environment, I often feel defeated by the complexity of our time. It is a comfort to remember the clarity and conviction of my childhood pledge.

My experience in Port Angeles reminded me of my earliest attachment to animals. For five hours I had enjoyed the company of another creature and now I almost regretted ending our time together. Reluctantly, I finished the task and lowered the cormorant into a pool with other birds. This was the final test; if it could float, its feathers were oil free.



Seagull Feet
Detail from an original woodcut by Konrad Gesner, 1555 (Zurich)

Success. The bird swam off and the washroom volunteers cheered. The cormorant looked strong, and after it regained energy and natural oils, other volunteers would release it on a clean shoreline miles from where it had been found.

But release was weeks away, and as I watched the bird, I realized I would never know what happened to it. The mortality rate of animals rescued from oil spills is depressingly high. Even if they outlive capture and cleaning, many later succumb to lethal doses of ingested oil. And of those released, few remain capable of reproduction. I knew the statistics, but I did not dwell on them when I left the clinic. I still like to think that the cormorant is alive, a survivor. If a bird can be said to express a will to live, this one seemed to do so.

It is the hope of saving even a few animals that motivates volunteers at an oil spill clinic. Confronted by death, we work hard to preserve life. We do what we can and in the process we are changed. Like other volunteers, I have returned home with a stronger commitment to conservation and a new appreciation of life. In the end, I realize my efforts with the birds have helped me more than I ever hope to help the birds.

—Constance Perenyi

Why Clean Birds?

Opinions vary. If the issue is defined in the usual grown-up manner of how much personal time and money we ought to disburse to achieve the reward of saving 'just' a few hundred individual birds that represent 'just' common species; the resultant judgement is still going to find a way of depending mostly on how anybody values either their own time or their own money.

On another level entirely, the very idea of establishing criteria in terms of time and money seems emblematic of the way that the most powerful and sober among us (including too many politicians and oil company executives) prefer to transmute an essentially compassionate activity like washing birds into abstractly predictable economic/energy terms.

We need more, not less compassion. Seeing sick birds and thinking time and money devalues the heightened awareness about nature that only arises when actual people possessed of actual compassion find a way to actually interact with actual animals individually.

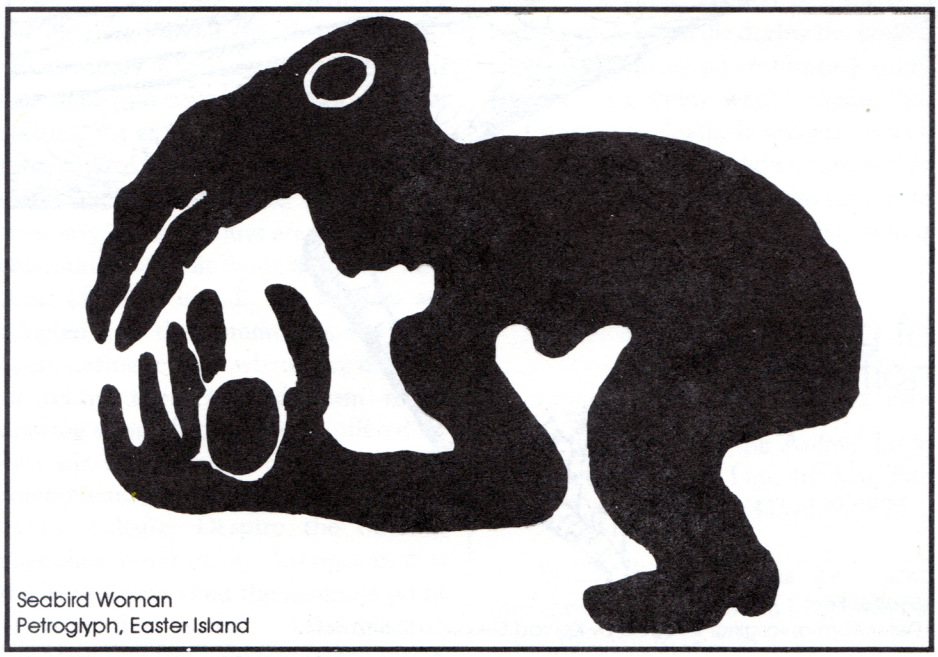
On another level entirely, it should also be pointed out that the skills gained from washing birds in the Pacific Northwest, recently motivated two longtime Washington State volunteers to travel to Argentina where they set up a clinic to save the highly endangered Magellenic Penguins who were dying *en masse* from a recent oil spill. In this case, the key terms defining value are "highly endangered" and "en masse".

It is an overly complex and wildly ironic world we humans have invented for ourselves. I too often get stuck in my own mythical worldview and it constantly causes me to feel confusion over "issues" like compassion. In Argentina, those same limitations of time and energy loosened up funding that eventually dictated that the volunteers focus their time and energy on washing penguins while permitting more common species to perish. Who would do it any differently?

The orthodox environmental movement favors this pragmatic approach to expressing compassion for animals. And yet, who can deny that the pragmatic view of compassion also upholds a rigidly hierarchical worldview of how humans and animals ought to behave when they share a common neighborhood, not to mention a common planet.

On another level entirely, those who subscribe to this worldview often find clever ways to couch their point of view in tricky euphemistic language that makes them sound both hands-on and activist; while a closer analysis makes their hands-on and activist statements sound suspiciously hands-off and aloof because it irrevocably voids individual animals of either rights or sentience. The most articulate among them prefer to represent their compassion by surrendering all motivation to ***collective*** terms like *biodiversity* and *species extinction.*

By no stretch of the imagination, am I trying to depict either term as specious. In fact, they define two of the most overriding concerns of our time. I prefer to put a skewed spin on their meaning, based mostly on my quirky suspicions about the semantics of compassion.



Seabird Woman
Petroglyph, Easter Island

Focusing all our attention on large 'overriding' problems does not offer much hope for individual action in a world where the cumulative activities of 5 billion human beings are impacting everything everywhere all the time. Dealing with environmental problems in *collective* language breeds complacency and dulls our senses to what any single individual could possibly do to help. Within this climate, the bird washers make the case that nature is neither external nor impersonal.

Maybe so. But every year, ever more devastating tragedies seem to occur ever more often, causing us to continually redefine our very concept of the inconceivable. Existing in a constant state of crisis management as we are, what were once considered tragedies are now hardly considered at all. For example, significant oil spills are occurring two or three times each month in US coastal waters. And although no species of common seabird is yet extinct, every single one of them continues to deplete in numbers.

Living as we do within a generically destructive society, it might start to sound downright fatuous and even counter-productive to think about someone spending an entire day washing ten or twenty birds. And therein lies one reason why—despite the hope they offer—such as bird washers occasionally suffer a problem of credibility. There are many expert detractors who believe that it is far better to deal with birds in terms of *species*, and let the *individuals* fend for themselves.

This has a name. It's called *triage*, and it wants us to abandon efforts to save the few and the common, in hopes of saving the many and the endangered. Unfortunately, we humans are not doing a very good job of helping either the few or the many, the common or the rare. We fail on every front.

On another level entirely, a worldview that focuses on ever larger collective nouns inevitably begins to exclude the more singular, hands-on relationship. This cultural preference for *distancing* offers yet another reason why some within the "expert" communities increasingly turn up among the critics of the nose-to-beak amateur style favored by bird washers. To paraphrase the critics' point of view: the issue should never be about saving animal *lives* because we hardly have enough time to save animal *species*.

The nose-to-beak point of view is rebuked as patently anthropomorphic; implying that we should reserve our sense of individuality (and the resultant caring) exclusively for other humans. In other words, birds are simple instinctoids who don't know compassion from martian. Yet even as this argument depicts the bird washers as naive romantics caught in an expressionistic world; it also depicts its promoters as dispassionate villains who would be just as happy to incinerate all the instinctoids. Given the choice bteween the two views, the rest of us may sometimes go a bit overboard in delegating too few resources to saving too few birds. Call it the collectivization of compassion.

In the best of all possible worlds, the collectivization of compassion would indeed seem a strange credo; although it starts to make much more sense in a world whose fate is utterly controlled by humans—but which humans, themselves, seem quite incapable of controlling. Conventional wisdom concludes that our very sanity sometimes depends upon each one of us developing an ability to subtley distance ourselves from the catastrophe we live inside. Making obeisance to collective nouns and pragmatic values certainly helps achieve that end.

On another level entirely, the distinction between animal *species* and animal *lives* also points to what is perhaps the most striking perceptual difference between the environmental movement and the animal rights movement. The so-called Environmentalists tend to deal with concepts that depict nature as collections: concepts like habitat destruction, and biodiversity.

The animal rightists tend to focus on all the crucial concepts of individuality: animal pain, animal rights, animal souls. Perhaps intriguingly, most animal rights people also consider themselves environmentalists although not so many environmentalists consider themselves advocates of animal rights. If nothing else, the way members from the one movement view members from the other movement would make a revealing study about the morès of our time.

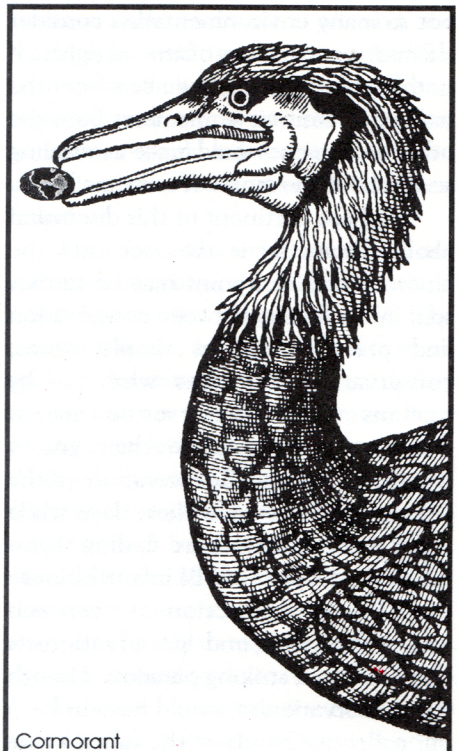
Perhaps pertinent to this discussion about distancing is the fact that the enviromental viewpoint may be further split into a duality between conservation and preservation. In simple terms, conservation signifies wise use by humans while preservation means humans ought to leave their grubby hands off nature. Conservation is the politically correct view these days, while many preservationists are finding themselves the subjects of FBI investigations.

The distinction between conservationists and preservationists also leads to a striking paradox. Though the conservationists would have us keep our collective hands on the (ahem) wise use of animals, they are actually *further* distanced from both animals and nature than the preservationists who ask us to stay away as often as we can. This occurs because, at this late date, it takes far more compassion and unselfishness to keep hands *off* nature than *on*.

If delineating too many camps seems to lead finally to confusion, then permit me to bring this writing back down to earth again by concluding that *all* the camps are created in response to the one and only environmental crisis. If the environmental crisis is understood as a crisis in the way human beings perceive nature, then perhaps all of us need to start relating to such as oil-soaked seabirds and mammals as if they are actual neighbors fallen victim to our own (yours and my) greed and folly.

In that light, I for one always feel outright appreciation to learn that there are unselfish human volunteers traveling out to the Coast, some coast, any coast; gone off washing birds for the weekend; doing whatever they can to atone for the very considerable sins of our entire species. On another level entirely, these bird washers represent you and I, and we all need to express our gratitude for their compassion.

—Jim Nollman



Cormorant
computer manipulation of a woodcut
by Konrad Gesner, 1555, (Zurich)

Book Reviews

The White Dawn

An Eskimo Saga; By James Houston, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich; 1971

This is easily the most intense novel I've ever read about the clash that too-often occurs when modern Europeans first come into contact with a traditional culture. Set at the turn of the 20th century, and told by a young Inuit man, the story begins when three whalers lose their way in a storm and are rescued by a community of Inuit living along the east coast of Baffin island. The whalers are adopted into the community, but soon cause lasting tension when they demand to retain their individualism while drawing upon all the benefits offered up by their hosts; and without ever fully comprehending the exigencies of that exotic culture. Despite the obvious masculine tenor of my description, it is the Inuit women and the feminine point of view that actually fills out the complexity of this very realistic account.

The White Dawn was also made into a film starring Timothy bottoms. The film was powerful although it pales incomparison to the novel.

...Next day we watched the tides and waited patiently. But the fish in numbers did not come to us again. Something must have offended them. Perhaps the fish did not like to have their flesh burned black [as the foreigners preferred them cooked]; perhaps some child or one of the foreigners had thrown a stone toward the river and angered them. When the huge tides did come, the river went mad, and we were drenched in a deluge of rain. The wind rose and blew violentlyout of the south. Most of the fish lines fell in the night and the dogs devoured the catch. Too much of the high tidewater was forced into the narrow river, and it overran its banks, flooding over the top of the stone weir, which disappeared entirely beneath the surface of the rushing water. No fish were held during that vital time. They all passed over our trap and up the river to hide from us in the depths of the lake. There they would remain, locked beneath the oncoming winter"s ice. Nine freezing moons would pass before summer would drive the fish to sea again.

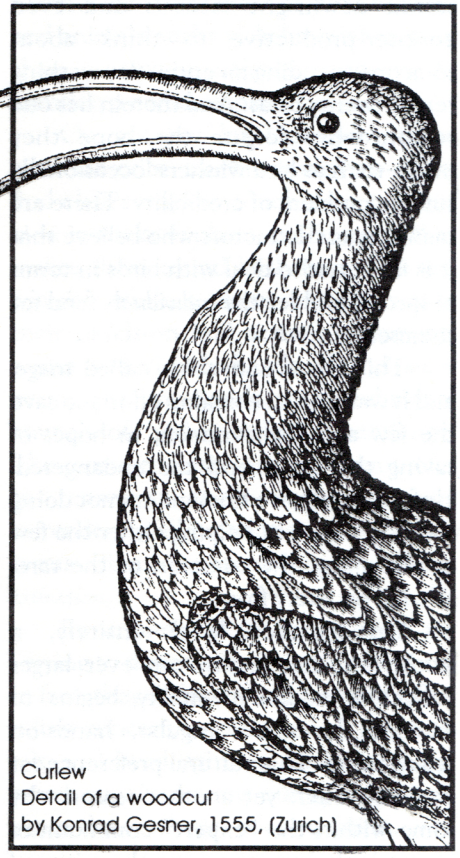
It was a terrible thing to lose the fish, to go into winter with our caches empty. The strangers did not fully understand our misfortune, but they would suffer for it later. If winter hunting goes badly, people often die during the broken ice of early spring when hunting is impossible. We knew whole camps that had starved to death. It was just as well that our three visitors did not know this, for we believed that there was no way to change the bad things that were coming to them or to the rest of us.

Objecting to Dissection

A publication of the Animal Legal Defense Fund, 1363 Lincoln Ave; San Rafael, Ca, 94901; tel: (415)459-0885

When dissection was introduced into the school curriculum in the 1870's, it was thought to be a good learning tool in the study of anatomy, physiology, and the theory of evolution. Today, new teaching methods have been developed which can replace dissection. But dissection today is a big business. Over three million frogs a year are killed in high school biology classes; in the process, natural habitats are decimated and entire ecologies are threatened. Countless cats, mice, rabbits, and pigs are also sacrificed for dissection experiments. This book, published by lawyers and written for high school students, tells what to do if you're fifteen years old and your teacher says she's going to flunk you unless you start shaping up and stick a pin in some poor frog's brain but you still refuse to do it.

...Even more destructive is the desensitizing effect of mutilating and dismembering animals in the name of science and in the cause of "education". Somehow the study of "life science"—meant to instill wonderment and respect for life—has become a science of death. Dissection teaches students the sinister lesson that animal life is expendable and unimportant.



Curlew
Detail of a woodcut
by Konrad Gesner, 1555, (Zurich)

Winter Gardening

by Binda Colebrook; Maritime Publications; Everson Washington; 1984

Arne Naess, founder of the deep ecology movement, is said to have seriously considered calling his new philosophy, An Ecology of Lifestyle. In fact, the only real way any of us can hope to turn around the current dilemma, is for each of us to adopt a lifestyle that brings us closer to the Earth while taking us further away from her very limited resources. Organic gardening as a serious pursuit offers one of the very best paths towards a more ecological lifestyle, and the idea of learning to garden throughout every month of the entire year offers much food for thought, as well as for table. Given the drastic variations of winter climate that occurs around this fair land of ours, this particular book tends to focus its discussion around the clement winter climate of the Pacific Northwest. But its major tenets apply anywhere that people want to extend their growing season. I also find it revealing that almost none of the crops she recommends have ever been put through the grinder of modern hybridism. The majority of cultivars I plant, myself, developed over thousands of years by peasant farmers in China, Japan, and central Europe.

...If you think about this a bit, you will see that growing winter crops means that you turn from a summer gardener into a year round gardener. I suppose I really should have written a book about year round gardeneing, but if I had done that, I would have had to devote space to tomatoes and cucumbers when it is the cool season crops that need to be discussed. Also, you might have missed the point: the point is that in this climate you don't have to be without vegetables in the fall, winter and early spring if you use the right varieties, observe the right sowing dates, understand the principles of cool season production, and experiment for yourself.

...I have come to treasure leeks, so hardy, so tasty, so attractive

Meditations with Animals

A Native American Bestiary by Gerald Hausman; Bear and Company; Santa Fe; 1986

Native American animal myths always seem to present the most cosmic ideas in the most entertaining and captivating way possible. There must be something to it. This collection, from a publisher who seems to specialize in works that enhance the connection between earth and spirit, is one of those books that wants you to open it anywhere and simply start reading. It also permits you to stop reading anywhere and still come away having your mood enhanced.

...The child took the bag and flung it
up into the air and the
bag sailed out
the smoke
hole
and that is how stars
came into the world.

—Tlingit

...Old Coyote, dawn stealer
in the first days of life,
howling at the center
of all things dark
with his mocking heart--
laughing, laughing
at the sun--
a memory too hot
to hold
on even
his tricky tongue.

...Like Coyote, eternal Trickster of plains and pueblos, swamps and woods, Raven is a birther of mischief. He is also a way-changer, shape-changer, way-shower. Coyote stole the sun and lost his eyes; Raven turned into a human baby star-thief, kidnapped a chief, and made himself into water. There is not end to either of these mischief-makers.

...To eat you must have prayer. To pray, you must have dreams.

IC News

An excerpt from the Interspecies Newsletter has recently appeared in the Winter '92 issue of *Utne Reader* (What Ever Happened to Nature Films). Another excerpt, "The Case of the Pain of Whales" will soon appear in book form via, Finding Home:The Best of Orion Magazine soon to be published by Beacon Press. "Interspecies Protocol" from the Summer 1991 Interspecies newsletter will soon appear in a book about eco-community entitled Living Connections to be published in mid 1992 by New Society. A Jim Nollman essay about trumpeter swans and real estate development will appear in the February issue of *Animal's Agenda*. And for those who live in the Pacific Northwest, Jim is now writing slightly offbalance gardening pieces on a monthly basis for *Pacific*, the magazine of the Sunday Seattle Times.

Our film concept, Talking to Beluga, remains right on-track as editing for the pilot begins next month in Chicago. This ten minute film is a collaboration between IC and media production company, the Arc Group. We are providing the narration most of which has been excerpted from the Fall Interspecies Newsletter (Talking to Beluga). The film is being produced by Doug Nelson of the ARC group.

Lastly, all of us at IC offer our most humble thanks to all those members and sponsors who heard our worrisome plea for funding aid and rose to the occasion to get us through a very difficult time. Though the national recession seems more dangerous than ever, we seem to be nearly back to our normal mid-winter level again. We're still seeking a good FAX machine.